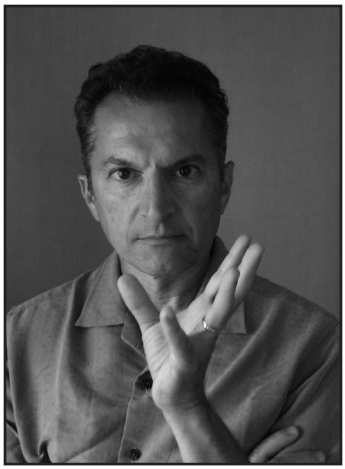
Daring and Doubting
Russell Scott Valentino



"What is doubt? You don't believe in doubt."
Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*

I remember a talk given by Michael Henry Heim in which he was asked by an admirer how he dared to translate from such a variety of different languages. He very quickly turned the innocent question into an occasion for self-critique, asking of himself not *how do you dare* but *how dare you!?* It was a fine illustration of the subtle inflections in Heim's communication, the little gems of irony and innuendo that sparkled in his speech, his letters, and, most of all, his many translations. But it was also a serious question, suggesting a deep suspicion from outside—can you really know enough to do that?—and a potentially productive doubt from inside—can I really know enough to do this?

For what does knowing enough mean, if not having a solid grasp of a foreign language, its grammar and syntax, its sound possibilities, regionalisms, slang, and idioms, all from the period in which one's source text was written, and also having a thorough understanding of its genre, its historical forms and variations, the poetics of the period in question, not to mention the author's range and experience, and then—pivoting 180 degrees in the changeable manner that translation critics ironically associate with being faithful—knowing at least as much or more about the linguistic and literary traditions of the receiving culture, its poetics, and genres, and sound possibilities, and so on? And not just knowing about them but being able to manipulate them, which means creating literature within the receiving culture's conventions, handling pace or the sense of an ending, writing snappy dialogue, purple or minimalist prose, differentiated voices, and finding or creating metaphors, sayings, and turns of phrase appropriate to language users of different ages and cultures, a 20-year-old homeless man in a coastal resort, for instance, or a 60-year-old widow on an inland farm. Doubt in

My Recommendations

***Too Loud a Solitude* by Bohumil Hrabal, translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim.**
Heim is always good at making things seem simple but this book is often overlooked, it seems to me.

***Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin, translated from the Russian by James Falen.**
I have taught multiple translations of this work and made comparisons of them all. Falen's is the best. He makes the language seem effortless, which is exactly what Pushkin does, as if you're looking at a parquet floor from one end of a room. All you see from that angle is the sheen. When you look from above, you see all the intricate detail and you can't help but marvel at how it all fits together.

***I Never Dared Hope for You* by Christian Bobin, translated from the French by Alison Anderson.**
Again, elegance and apparent ease come to mind. But here it's nonfiction, and there's more lyricism involved, maybe even more lyricism than in Pushkin's verse. Alison has a really good feel for it, and here language is so beautiful in places you just feel like crying.

such a scenario seems not only natural but healthy, and the translator who does not doubt on the inside is likely to raise doubt on the outside, inviting the innocent question above to turn into its nasty alter-ego, not how do you dare, but how dare you?

That all of this can happen inside a translator's head should not be surprising. It can get pretty claustrophobic in there. And I suspect that the more languages you stuff inside, the more likely such confrontations become, with sets of grammars and conventions lining up against one another like battle ranks in a medieval allegory, only instead of Prudence clashing shields with Courage, it is phalanxes of helmeted articles, conjugations, and idioms that face off, and, from the outside at least, such battles are likely to take on a mock epic air.

It's not just a matter of the professor chuckling to himself behind the podium, however. Take, for instance, the interpreter in the room when Jesus talked to Pilate. Oh, I understand that most Biblical scholars assume they must have spoken together in some mutually intelligible language, but if they didn't—if, let's say, Pilate's Greek was rusty or Jesus's rudimentary, and they called upon that inscrutable third part known, in some circles, as an *interpreter*—

would anyone remember the fact of his presence, let alone his participation? *And lo Interpretus did say unto Pontius Pilate*... It somehow lacks that authoritative ring and raises, well, doubt.

Imagine, moreover, the deep doubt likely in such a scene. Let's see, thinketh Interpretus, what in the world could the accused be trying to say? "Steward of another realm?" "King of another community?" "Chieftain of the dominion of the spirit?" That sounds awful! But "not of this world" isn't bad, even if the meaning is murky. Interpretus doth wonder about the word "polis" as a possibility—the city as the world, the world as the city, the world city or *cosmopolis*, as in the teachings of Chrysippos, and maybe this is what the accused means. Perhaps he has traveled in those parts and understands these teachings—but there isn't time to think it all through. Interpretus' legs begin to tremble as the guards take the prisoner away and he wonders whether he has said the wrong thing, offered up the wrong solution. He listened, tried to understand, and made his choice. Oh, if only he could explain! These words he had chosen were *like* the foreign ones, but they were *not* the foreign ones. Neither Praetor nor anyone else understood that he was not providing an equivalent; he was painting a new picture with paints whose timbres the source language might or might not have. And what if he didn't understand correctly? What if there was a timbre in the source that he had never heard before? Something from the accused's childhood, or village life in a village he'd never been to, or a mumbled prefix like pseudo- or demi- or quasi-, or a suffix swallowed altogether that made a positive into a negative or a negative into a positive? What if he had extrapolated too much based on his own paltry understanding of such things and the world? Interpretus is no expert, not in this sort of conversation, or in anything really. He knows words. Imperfect yet precise. And powerful. What if the words he used were harmful in some way he could not know?

"The translator who does not doubt on the inside is likely to raise doubt on the outside."

Fortunately, unlike our interpreter brethren, we translators generally have time, and the kind of dreadful doubt that might incapacitate Interpretus can be turned to positive ends. The special timbre of a word. The trilingually punning title. The insinuating tone. The regionalism. The textual variant. The

dialogue marked as innocent or knowing or half-witted. The nuanced cultural reference. The 12-page footnote. The balanced sentence period. The rhymed, metered poem. Embedded in a poem. The palindrome. The fragment.

These and a million more of these become questions to be researched, problems to be explored, points of doubt. And provocations to the daring.

Russell Scott Valentino is a professor at Indiana University, where he is chair of the Slavic Languages & Literatures department. His translations include Sabit Madaliev's The Silence of the Sufi *and Predrag Matvejevic's* Between Exile and Asylum: An Eastern Epistolary. *He received two NEA Translation Fellowships in 2002 and 2010.*